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SUBJECT: EAST JAVA: BOY HEALER GIVING HEALTH MINISTER A BLACK EYE

This message is sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Seeking a cure from water blessed by a ten year old boy, thousands are flocking to a small village near the East Java city of Jombang. Provincial authorities have tried to stop the flood of potential patients, but with marginal success. Four have died while queuing to see the boy. East Java's new Governor Soekarwo publicly blamed inadequate access to health care for this turn to superstition. Rankled by critics, Indonesian Health Minister Supari has struggled to refocus blame onto East Java's health service and away from her Ministry. The phenomenon illustrates the range of problems faced by Indonesia's largest province in serving its poorest citizens. End Summary.

The Health Minister Blames the Province

[1](#)2. (SBU) Indonesia's health care system has been the subject of a continuous drumbeat of negative news reports over the past few months. In recent days, local media have increased the tempo, headlining heart-rending tales of woe from thousands flocking to be cured by Ponari, a 10-year old faith healer living in rural East Java. Bristling at the growing criticism of Indonesia's healthcare system, Health Minister Siti Fadillah Supari blamed regional autonomy for the public's discontent. In recent testimony before the Health Committee of Indonesia's House of Representatives, Supari said that those eligible for no-cost public health insurance are too often denied services by local clinics. As for Ponari, Supari said, people will lose interest once they see that the ill do not recover.

The Governor Blames the Health Service

[1](#)3. (SBU) Responding to daily television interviews with villagers crying over the failure of conventional treatment, newly inaugurated Governor Soekarwo complained that health care for the poor is expensive and local clinics fail to reach those most at risk. Soekarwo added that the closure of Ponari's "practice" by police following the death of four while waiting in line was only part of the solution; a concrete policy response is also required, including increased funding for health services. Soekarwo also proposed reaching out to sick villagers by providing friendly and free health care. While the politicians trade accusations, the poor still flock to Ponari's home looking for a cure.

Rush for Miracles Sparks Healthcare Debate

[1](#)4. (SBU) The Head of Surabaya's Municipal Health Department, Esty Rachmie, told the Consulate that the Ponari phenomenon is a sign that something is wrong with the system. Management and

outreach at local clinics remains subpar despite gradual improvement in access and staffing. While Esty accepted the need to improve local healthcare delivery, she echoed the Health Minister's comments blaming regional autonomy for creating wide disparities in quality and services. As Esty explained, in many of East Java's regencies, health education is inadequate and contract physicians working for East Java's Provincial Health Service too often neglect their role as health educators.

The Money in Meteor-Powered Healthcare

15. (SBU) Ponari traces his healing powers to a knock on the head by a walnut-sized meteorite on January 17. A few days after being struck, Ponari dipped the stone in a glass of water and offered his sick neighbor a drink as a cure. The neighbor was reportedly cured and Ponari's reputation as a healer quickly grew. Now a girl named Dewi claims to have been hit with a similar meteorite and prospective patients have begun arriving at her door.

16. (SBU) Ponari's family has collected an estimated billion rupiah (USD 84,000) from his patients so far. This is no small feat in a province where the legal minimum wage provides less than three dollars a day. Press reports suggest that the bulk of this income might have come from a few wealthy donors. However, the long lines in front of Ponari's house suggest that there have been many willing to pay the equivalent of twenty cents for a glass of Ponari's water. For now, Jombang authorities have succeeded in reducing the hoards descending on Ponari, but as local copycat healers arrive on the scene, controversy about what allowed him to flourish will continue.

MCCLELLAND